



IELTS TEST TRAINING FOR STUDENTS IN ORDER TO IDENTIFY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND PROGRESS IN THE EXAM

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Abstract

International English Language Testing System (IELTS), as a standardized test is designed to assess the language ability of students who need to study or work where English is the language of communication. The purpose of this study is to train students of sixth semester of Foreign Languages at the Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia in IELTS test and to identify their progress in this kind of test, through applying a series of workshops. This study has a descriptive approach because it allowed us to describe and register what happened during the training. Data was collected throughout students' surveys, students' workshops, students' IELTS tests, and students' reflections. This study helped students to improve and reflect about their own learning process, and it also provided the tools and information to take this kind of test and give

Resumen

International English Language Testing System (IELTS), como un examen estandarizado, está diseñado para evaluar la habilidad del idioma de los estudiantes quienes necesitan estudiar o trabajar donde el inglés es el idioma de comunicación. El propósito de este estudio es entrenar a los estudiantes de sexto semestre de lenguas extranjeras de la Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia para la presentación del examen IELTS e identificar su progreso en este tipo de examen, a través del uso y la aplicación de talleres. Este estudio tiene un acercamiento descriptivo porque nos permite describir y registrar que pasó durante el entrenamiento. Los instrumentos utilizados para la recolección de información fueron: encuestas a los estudiantes, talleres, IELTS test, y reflexiones de los estudiantes. Este estudio ayudó a los estudiantes a mejorar y reflexionar sobre su proceso de aprendizaje. Este estudio también proporcionó las herramientas e infor-

the students more confidence to assume academic challenges. Mock workshops provided students the opportunity to develop the different skills required in these kinds of tests. The activities developed during this study allowed students to improve and reflect about their own learning process and their English level.

Key Words: Training, skills, international standardized test, International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

INTRODUCTION

It is interesting to have a positive attitude towards the language and to have solid ideas in order to have a secure future as teachers. It is very important that students show more interest to get to know about the program of Foreign Languages and its advantages such as: exchange programs, scholarships, and other opportunities that the UPTC offers to the students of different majors interested in these types of programs and students who have a high English level.

Through the development of this research project, we wanted to do a diagnosis of students' knowledge about the IELTS test as well as the implementation of different workshops in order to describe and analyze the English training that the students had about IELTS proficiency test concluding by pointing out the importance of training for standardized exams earlier in their major.

mación necesaria para la presentación de este tipo de exámenes con el fin de brindar a los estudiantes seguridad para asumir diversos retos académicos. Los talleres aplicados suministraron a los estudiantes la oportunidad de desarrollar las diferentes habilidades requeridas en este tipo de examen. El desarrollo de las actividades durante este estudio permitió a los estudiantes mejorar y reflexionar acerca de su propio proceso y su nivel de inglés.

Palabras clave: entrenamiento, habilidades, examen estandarizado internacional, International English Language Testing System IELTS.

Mock tests provide students with the opportunity to develop the different skills required in these kinds of tests. However, they must be well organized, planned, and assessed by people with enough training in this area. The activities developed during this study allowed students to improve and reflect about their own learning process and their English level.

The population of the present study were students of sixth semester of the Foreign Languages program of the Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia, since they already have a higher level of English competence which has been fostered in the five previous levels; however, we found relevant in this study that language students should be trained since the beginning of the major. The intention of this research was to start to helping students become aware of the importance the test has in their personal and professional lives.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As a background, the IELTS exam is designed to assess the language ability of candidates who need to study or work where English is the language of communication. IELTS is recognized by universities in many countries including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, The United Kingdom and the United States of America, among others.

Although we visited some institutions such as The British Council, Universidad de los Andes, Universidad Externado, Universidad Javeriana, Universidad Politécnico Grancolombiano, Universidad Militar Nueva Granada, Agency Ozy International, Universidad Konrad Lorenz, Universidad EAFIT (Medellin), Universidad Icesi (Cali) and Universidad Gran Colombia (Armenia), we found out that there are only two authorized centers who have the license to apply the IELTS test in Bogota, these places are the British Council and the Agency Ozy International. These places are managed by the University of Cambridge ESOL examinations (Cambridge ESOL), British Council and IDP, and IELTS Australia.

They mentioned that the IELTS is not recommended under the age of sixteen. The materials they use to prepare the students are official practice materials that are available from test centers, or directly from Cambridge ESOL or IDP IELTS Australia. The results are known after taking the exam; there are thirteen days for the students to get to know their results, and the score is from 0 to 9. The Agency Ozy International informed that there are two types of tests:

- The Academic test and,
- The General IELTS

The former is for students who are thinking of studying in another country and the latter is for people who want to immigrate to English speaking countries.

Libia López, the English department director at Universidad Militar Nueva Granada, says that the students, before graduating from their majors, have to take one of these exams: IELTS, TOEFL, MICHIGAN or PET to certify their English level. According to Camilo Quintana, an English teacher of the English department at Universidad de Los Andes, they provide their facilities to the British Council for the students to take the IELTS test twice or three times during the year.

Ana Mercedes Bonilla from Universidad Konrad Lorenz mentioned that they have applied the IELTS test only to teachers who have a Master's degree.

According to Luz Elena Cardona from the International Language Center of the Universidad Gran Colombia in Armenia, in the year 2005 they started training their students for the IELTS during the regular English courses; what they do is that they test the students in every level using the IELTS test model so they get used to the type of questions.

The previous piece of information was searched to have a deeper and clear understanding of different institutions that provide training to take the IELTS test in Bogotá. And it evidenced that most of the universities do not prepare the students for the IELTS exam and that there are no research projects or studies related to the IELTS tests.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Training

It involves an organized attempt to assist learning through instruction, observation or practice. According to Doff (1992) "Training is when a person prepares or is prepared for a job, activity or sport by learning skills or by mental or physical exercise". The term training has been misunderstood by some people who think that it is only teaching specific behaviors; however, it can also be taken as encouraging students to discover the most appropriate strategies for them, that is to say what works best for them as individuals.

Doff (1992) presents a set of strategies to help teachers to work in a better way. The following aspects are the most relevant in training. Learning training aims to help learners consider the factors that affect their learning and discover the learning strategies that suit them best so that they may become more effective learners and take on more responsibility for their own learning. It focuses their attention on the process of learning so that the emphasis is on "how to learn rather than on what to learn."

Learner training is based on the following assumptions: Individuals learn in different ways and may use a variety of learning strategies at different times depending on a range of variables, such as the nature of the learning task, mood, motivation levels; the more informed learners are about language learning, the more effective they will be at managing their own learning.

We think that helping learners to take on

more responsibility for their own learning can be beneficial for the following reasons: learning can be more effective when students take control of their own learning because they learn what they are ready to learn; those students who are responsible for their own learning can carry on learning outside the classroom; students who know about learning can transfer learning strategies to other subjects. Learning training, therefore, aims to provide learners with the alternatives from which to make informed choices about what, how, why, when and where they learn. This is not to say that they have to make all of these decisions all the time. They may, indeed, choose to be teacher-dependent. After analyzing the previous information, we can see that it is closely connected with the IELTS exam because if students are not eager to learn, no matter the training they receive, it would not be successful. So, the teachers' role changes because they are now a guide to promote autonomy in students.

During the training, the teachers intend to develop in the student the capacity to be a learner with autonomy, creativity and ability, responsible to be independent to face society. Training is an excellent way in which the students have the opportunity to develop their behavior through different activities and encourage them to learn a foreign language.

Standardized tests

According to Gronlund (1998), "A standardized test presupposes certain standard objectives, or criteria, that are held constant across one form of the test to another. The criteria in large-scale standardized tests are designed to apply

to a broad band of competencies that are usually not exclusive to one particular curriculum. A good standardized test is the product of a thorough process of empirical research and development. The Graduate Record Exam (GRE), the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), the Law School Aptitude Test (LSAT), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) they are all standardized because they specify a set of competencies (or standards) for a given domain, and through a process of construct validation they program a set of tasks that have been designed to measure those competencies”.

We consider that the training in the IELTS test helps students to become familiar with the type of questions and on answering them, to take into account different factors such as timing and anxiety, which could affect their results in these kinds of test. And it also helps teachers to make decisions regarding the instructional program. Standardized tests help universities measure how students in a given class or colleges system perform in relation to other students who take the same test.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The question for our study emerged from the experience we had during our career. We have noticed that there was not previous training to take international tests in the Foreign Languages Program at the UPTC; for this reason, sixth semester students of the Foreign Languages Program were trained on the IELTS proficiency test to help them become familiar with the type of questions and to deal with different factors

such as timing and anxiety which could affect their results in these kinds of tests. Consequently, the following question was stated: What do Foreign Languages sixth semester students reveal about their English reading, writing and listening skills in a mock IELTS test after being exposed to a training course?

Research Type: Descriptive Research

This is a descriptive study which provides descriptions of events that occur with no intervention or change during the research connected with language development and processing. Seliger (1989) provides an interesting definition for descriptive research which “involves a collection of techniques used to specify, delineate or describe naturally occurring phenomena without experimental manipulation” (p. 124). With this project we contributed to make students conscious of their development of reading, writing and listening abilities through workshops which were designed to identify the participants’ progress in this kind of test, and English level in the IELTS test.

Rojas (2005) argues that the descriptive approach is aimed at documenting aims to document happenings in a classroom that would be unwieldy and incomprehensible in the first reflection about the classroom environment.

Research methodology: case study

This research design is used when the teachers are interested in describing some aspects of the second language performance or development of one or more participants, because it is believed that individual performance will be more

revealing than studying large groups of participants. Our case aims to describe and observe participants' progress in this kind of test and their English level in the IELTS test. Watt (1980) adds that a "case study is concerned with the interaction of factors and events and that it is only taking a practical instance that we can obtain a full picture of this interaction" (p. 6-7).

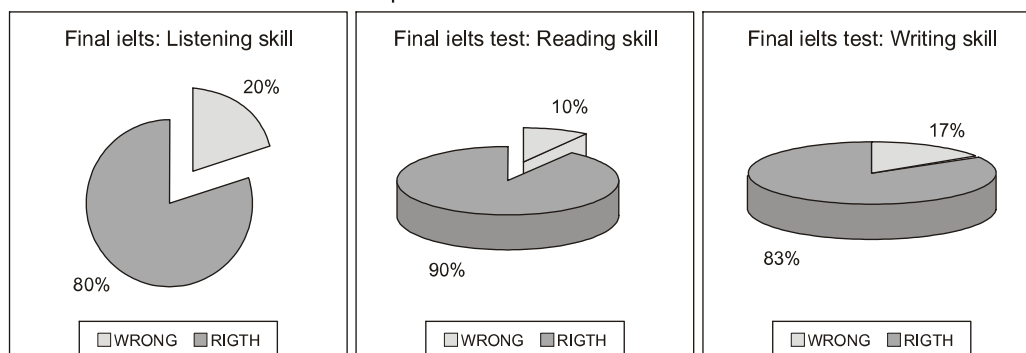
Along the project, two mock tests were applied (one at the beginning and the other at the end) and a students' reflection was applied in order to observe students' behavior and attitudes towards language learning and standardized tests. Two surveys were applied one before beginning the training and the other at the end of the course. The purpose of the first one was to get to know what information students had about the IELTS test, and the final wanted to observe participants' progress in this kind of test, and English level in the IELTS test.

Based on the book "Step up to IELTS", because it was a mock exam, we organized and applied a mock IELTS test to check the student's level in this kind of test, In the first mock IELTS, we noticed that ten students presented weaknesses in writing, reading and listening skills.

The graphic showed us that in the test 70% of the questions were right in listening and reading skills and 45% of the students answered the test correctly in the writing skill. Then, ten mock IELTS workshops with specific objectives, according to the students' weaknesses, were selected to train the students and to prepare them to take a final mock test. The design of the workshops was based on the weaknesses that students presented in the first mock test. Based on the results of these workshops the students presented mistakes in writing (grammar), for this reason, we prepared complementary classes. The final IELTS mock test was applied to observe if there was any progress in students' performance in the different skills reading, writing and listening skills and also to analyze if they increased their vocabulary.

In this final mock test it was analyzed that 80% of the students had good listening skill, 90% of the students had excellent reading and 83% of the students had good reading comprehension; compared with the first mock test, this final test showed that the students of sixth semester of Foreign Languages increased their vocabulary and they also became familiar with the type of questions and topics.

Graphic No. 13. Final IELTS Test



The application of tests had different purposes. On the one hand, it was aimed to observe the students' progress in this type of test and English level in the IELTS; on the other hand, it was used as a training strategy to help students of foreign languages foster their English learning process and to observe their weaknesses and strengths facing the development of the IELTS workshops.

The third instrument had to do with observation. It was an instrument which was used since the beginning of the training until the end. It allowed interaction between students and researchers because the classroom environment was enjoyable. Since each student was able to discover the best learning style; for instance, students

asked questions about the topics worked during the workshop, we explained to them their doubts and while they were answering the workshop, they asked each other questions about it.

Later on, we considered the students' reflection as the final instrument. It consisted of a set of open questions where the students' voices played a relevant role in the training process; they also had the opportunity to express their opinions, feelings and concerns about certain activities. Everybody agreed that it is necessary to emphasize more in the training for this kind of standardized test during the academic process. In the following part, the reader can observe the results of the first and final surveys and mock IELTS test.

UNIVERSIDAD PEDAGOGICA Y TECNOLOGICA DE COLOMBIA
 FACULTAD DE CIENCIAS DE LA EDUCACION
 LICENCIATURA EN LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS
 ESCUELA DE IDIOMAS

OBJETIVO:
 TRABAJO DE GRADO: AN ENGLISH TRAINING ABOUT THE IELTS PROFICIENCY TEST WITH STUDENTS OF SIXTH SEMESTER OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES OF THE UPTC

DESARROLLADO POR:
 HILDA MEDINA - ANDREA WAKED ESQUIVEL

DESCRIPCION DEL INSTRUMENTO:
 Observar los hábitos, comportamientos, habilidades y nivel de inglés de los estudiantes de la UPTC

NOMBRE: Mayra Alejandra Bautista EDAD: 20 FECHA: 20-4-07

ENCUESTA

1. ¿Conoce usted los exámenes internacionales?
 Si No

2. ¿Ha realizado algún tipo de examen internacional anteriormente?
 Si No

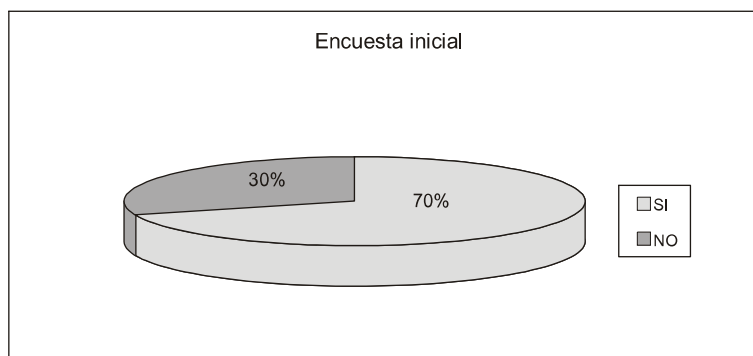
3. ¿Tiene conocimiento sobre el examen IELTS - International English Language Testing System?
 Si No

4. ¿Le gustaría saber más sobre este tipo de examen?
 Si No

5. ¿Cree usted que es importante que se implemente la capacitación del Examen IELTS en la universidad?
 Si No

An English training on the IELTS test to improve reading, writing and listening skills.

Graphic No.1 Results Questionnaire First Survey



According to the first survey 70% of the students were aware of the IELTS test and 30% of the students did not have information on this kind of test.

In the final survey it was noticed that the students had not worked before in this kind of training, they would like to continue training in this type of test.

Table 1 – Research Design

RESEARCH QUESTION	INSTRUMENTS	SETTING	PARTICIPANTS	RESEARCH TYPE
What do Foreign Language sixth semester students reveal of their English reading, writing and listening skills in IELTS Test after being exposed to a training course?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Surveys - IELTS tests - Workshops - Observation 	Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia. School of Languages ten students of sixth semester of foreign languages program	Ten sixth semester students of Foreign Languages Program at the Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia aged between 18-24.	Descriptive research Methodology: Case study.

CONCLUSIONS

It is important that the University has a special and well organized training in the different standardized tests, in order to help students to reinforce their learning process and to

provide more opportunities for them to reflect on their attitudes towards themselves as learners.

This academic training helped the students to create responsibility and self-confidence

in developing skills, acquiring a positive attitude and learning English to face new opportunities when traveling to another country or staying in Colombia; as well as it was useful for us in teaching English, because throughout this experience we could discover new ways to strengthen our knowledge and improve our reading, writing and listening skills. This project helped students to overcome their weaknesses in reading, writing and listening skills and increase their strengths through the activities we planned during the course.

Mock tests provided students the opportunity to develop the different skills required in these kinds of tests. The developed activities during this study allowed students to improve and reflect about their own learning process and their English level.

Standardized tests helped teachers to make decisions regarding the instructional program and it helped students to become familiar with the type of questions. We contributed to make students conscious of their development of reading, writing and listening abilities through workshops which were designed to observe participants' progress in this type of test and English level in the IELTS test.

We think that the training was relevant because it helped the students and us build strategies in learning English; we also observed that the students acquired more responsibility in their learning process, and they felt motivated to travel to the United States.

English teaching and learning processes are changing daily according to the students' needs. This research project aimed to reinforce the process, using an English training about IELTS proficiency test. To make it possible we planned surveys, workshops, IELTS tests and a students' reflection.

English training courses should be developed for students along the major in order to improve and reflect about their own learning process and give them more confidence to assume academic challenges

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THE AUTHOR

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APPENDIX 1: An English training about the IELTS proficiency test with students of sixth semester of Foreign Languages of the UPTC

Nombre: _____ Edad: _____ Fecha: _____

ENCUESTA

1. Conoce usted los exámenes internacionales?
Si _____ No _____
2. Ha realizado algún tipo de examen internacional anteriormente?
Si _____ No _____
3. Tiene conocimiento sobre el examen IELTS- International English Language Testing System?
Si _____ No _____
4. Le gustaría saber más sobre este tipo de examen?
Si _____ No _____
5. Cree usted que es importante que se implemente la capacitación del Examen IELTS en la universidad?
Si _____ No _____

APPENDIX 2: ENCUESTA FINAL

Nombre: _____ Edad: _____ Fecha: _____

ENCUESTA FINAL

1. Sabía usted algo de IELTS Test antes de realizar los talleres?
Si _____ No _____ Por qué _____
2. Había realizado anteriormente talleres o ejercicios de este tipo?
Si _____ No _____ Por qué _____
3. Cree que el trabajo realizado ha sido provechoso para usted?
Si _____ No _____ Por qué _____
4. Le gustaría seguir realizando este tipo de talleres?
Si _____ No _____ Por qué _____
5. Considera usted enfatizar más en esta clase de talleres durante el proceso académico de su carrera?
Si _____ No _____ Por qué _____
6. Usted se sintió motivado?
Si _____ No _____ Por qué _____
7. Esta motivación influyó positivamente en su proceso de aprendizaje?
Si _____ No _____ Por qué _____
8. Cree usted que el papel desempeñado por las autoras del proyecto fue excelente?
Si _____ No _____ Por qué _____

APPENDIX 3: STUDENT'S REFLECTION
An English training about the IELTS proficiency test with students
of sixth semester of Foreign Languages of the UPTC

Nombre: _____ Edad: _____ Fecha: _____

We are working in the research about the IELTS Test called "An English training about the IELTS proficiency test with students of sixth semester of Foreign Languages of the UPTC"; With this project we wanted to trained the students and give them different advices and helped them throughout their learning process abilities such as: listening, reading and writing that will help them by the time they will take the test.

1. How did you feel when you were taking the first IELTS workshops?

2. What did you think about the type of questions of the IELTS workshop?

3. Do you think this training will help you for your future when you graduate?

APPENDIX 4: Questionnaire Interviews Bogotá

To complement our information concerning the application of IELTS test we planned a visit to some places in Bogotá such as The British Council, Universidad de los Andes, Universidad Externado, Universidad Javeriana, Universidad Politécnico Grancolombia, Universidad Militar Nueva Granada, Agency Ozy International, the form bellow present us the questionnaire used during our visit.

- We will like to know what International Proficiency English Test do you know there are in Colombia?
- Are there any projects or thesis about the IELTS test in the University?
- Do you know what the IELTS test means?
- Is there any English training for proficiency test at the University?
- Would you like the University prepare the students to take this type of test?
- Are there any kinds of requirements to study Foreign Languages or Modern Languages?
- Do you know what English level do students need to study Foreign Languages?
- How do you think the students can take the IELTS test in the University?
- How do you think the students can show that they have excellent English level?